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ABSTRACT

As a planning and evaluation specialist in a state education agency, the author of this paper understands the types of assistance that researchers can provide the public schools. He argues that local school personnel want practical information that will help solve current problems, and are more frequently concerned with immediate, unexpected crises than with the root causes of those crises. However, local educators do need help in discovering what their real problems are. Researchers can teach them how to use their own information sources and local data to predict and cope with future problems. (Author/PGD)

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THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCH-TYPE PERSON IN A STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCY; OR, WHAT IS A NICE FELLOW LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THAT?

Paper Prepared for the Researchers for Action SIG Symposium:
"The Role of University Researchers in School Based Research"
1980 AERA Annual Meeting
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This paper is intended to present viewpoints and ideas that may be helpful when considering the topic of this symposium. I will begin by describing my role and activities in a state educational agency, in hopes this description will help the participants understand the perspective from which I speak. (I also think an explicit presentation of this perspective may help university-based researchers understand how the world looks to persons such as myself, thereby improving communication between the two groups.) Next, I will make some observations based on my experiences about what I think research-type persons should be prepared to do for local school districts.

My Formal Role and Activities

My formal job title is Planning and Evaluation Specialist, and I am funded 50% from Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title IV Parts B and C funds, and 50% from U.S. Department of Agriculture Nutrition Education and Training Act (NET) funds. It is expected that I will provide these two programs (which are, at this writing, physically located in two different office buildings 4 miles apart) with planning and evaluation services appropriate to their needs, and end up on the average devoting

half of my time to each. During slack periods it is expected that I will provide planning or evaluation assistance to LEAs or to persons within the DPI at their request.

I have the luxury of working with two other persons in evaluation for ESEA Title IV, one full-time evaluator and another half-time evaluator like myself. We work well together, often collaborating on tasks and sharing information, with the result that (in my opinion) we come up with better solutions and have a broader perspective than any one of us would operating alone. For the Nutrition Education and Training (NET) Program, I am the "Lone Ranger," and am the only evaluator.

My actual behaviors involve problem solving, such as applying statistical, sampling and research-design techniques to immediate, program-related problems. I hasten to add that most of the time these are not sophisticated applications, there is often a great emphasis on clarity, simplicity and usability. Sometimes similar problems are brought to me from other persons within DPI that are not part of ESEA Title IV or NET. I also do some identification, translation, and communication of research findings to such persons.

Occasionally I also do action-related quasi-research. Because I believe this is the same type of activity university-based researchers might fruitfully become engaged in, I shall briefly describe one such project.

In 1978 an administrator of a recently-formed local school district serving about 600 Native American students contacted the DPI for assistance in

their on-going district planning. Soon after, representatives of the Bureau of Evaluation, Planning, Information and Research visited the district. This visit resulted in a plan to conduct an indepth review of the district by gathering the views of a cross-section of district personnel, parents and students on such topics as district policies, administrative functioning, curriculum, coordination of federal and local programs, and other topics relevant to the district operation. Spokespersons for the various local groups were identified by the district and a team of six bureau personnel interviewed approximately thirty-six persons.

Our interview notes were organized, analyzed and developed into a report intended to be used for problem solving. The main body of the report, which was organized into a series of planning guides or worksheets, presented a series of broad questions that we believed the district administration and school board should consider. Each question covered a fundamental problem area identified through a topic analysis of the interview data, and was followed by recommendations as to how the school board might address and resolve that particular problem. This report was presented in written and oral form to an open meeting of the school board in the spring of 1979.

I cannot report that this effort resulted in any major changes in the district, but things do appear to have gotten better.

The Researcher and Local School Districts

The following is a philosophical framework I believe will help researchers to work with schools.

Gene Glass, in his remarks during the "Conceptual and Empirical Overviews of Educational Research" program of the 1979 AERA Annual Meeting,* presented a viewpoint which really appeals to me, and I share it with you along with my own interpretations. He acknowledged that from a general systems theory point of view, education is a highly unpredictable system. Many researchers have lamented this situation and worked designs to reduce the uncertainty. Glass went on to propose that another (possibly more fruitful) way of looking at the situation was to look at how the physical sciences cope with unpredictable systems, for example, weather. Even though we do have good ways of predicting weather, the meteorological system itself is highly unpredictable. Because of this unpredictability, we have also devised other ways of coping with unpredictable weather, such as umbrellas, windshield wipers and storm cellars.

In my opinion, school people are well aware that the educational system has a lot of unpredictability. They want ways of coping with this, not researchers who are trying to search out the regular, predictable elements. To pursue the weather analogy, they want researchers who can help them identify storms that are brewing, and can tell them whether they should just bring an umbrella or head for the storm cellar. They also want better umbrellas and storm cellars, and alternatives to these devices.

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*Reprinted as "Policy for the Unpredictable (Uncertainty Research and Policy)", Educational Researcher, Vol. 8, No. 9, (October 1979), pp. 12-14.

I believe the researcher who can help a city school administrator devise systems to identify when tensions are building towards dangerous levels in school early enough that he/she can take corrective action will be far more welcome than the researcher who wants to study the "root-causes" of the tension. Granted, an understanding of the root-causes may be important in the long run to preventing future tension buildups, and may also lead to better ways of defusing tension-filled situations. But that research should be jointly planned with the administrator after the original need for early identification has been addressed.

Suggestions

What, then, do I propose that research-type persons (either university or SEA based) do?

First, I suggest that researchers recognize that school people want information that will help them solve problems or make decisions.

- This means that sometimes the best thing a researcher can do for a local district is put them in touch with someone who has actually successfully dealt with a similar problem.
- If you work with a school district, focus on gathering information that can help them make decisions.
- You may have to show them how empirical information can be of use to school people. Sometimes just helping them organize and interpret existing data about their system will be necessary.

You may have to help them design a quasi-experiment that focuses on a topic of their interest.

Second, I suggest that researchers help school people find practical solutions to current problems, such as:

- cost containment
- assessing and improving instructional efficiency
- dropout prevention
- violence and vandalism
- accountability (verifying they've done their job).

Third, I suggest that researchers help school people identify what their "real" problems are. By this I mean that usually, local school people identify and respond to symptoms, and too often attack the symptom as if it was the problem. The researcher should be able to assist the LEA people with needs identification and clarification, identifying and prioritizing underlying problems, identifying and interpreting relevant research, locating and communicating with others who have solved similar problems, monitoring the implementation of their "solution", and evaluating the actual results of the solution.